


6-1-2009

Filming Postbourgeois Suburbia: Office Space and the New American Suburb

Shaun Huston

Western Oregon University, hustons@wou.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wou.edu/fac_pubs

 Part of the [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), and the [Geography Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Huston, S. (2009). Filming Postbourgeois Suburbia: Office Space and the New American Suburb. *Journal Of Popular Culture*, 42(3), 497-514. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5931.2009.00692.x

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Research at Digital Commons@WOU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Research Publications (All Departments) by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@WOU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@wou.edu.

Filming Postbourgeois Suburbia: *Office Space* and the New American Suburb

SHAUN HUSTON

DETACHED HOMES. WHITE PICKET FENCES. PRIVATE YARDS AND gardens. Park-like residential streets. These are the icons of the post–World War II suburban American Dream. By the 1980s, a plurality of Americans lived in the suburbs. Through the 1990s and on into the start of the twenty-first century, Americans continued their suburban migration (Brooks 3 and 5; Martinson 180; Garreau 8). The postwar dream was realized. Or was it? Largely due to their tremendous growth, the suburbs at the turn of the century, no longer matched their icons. Detached homes gave way to condos and even apartments. Beyond the picket fences lay office parks and shopping malls. Private yards and gardens were no longer guarantees. And yet, “when it comes to suburbia the American imagination is motionless” (Brooks 5). Residential exclusivity, family privacy, and isolation from work continue to govern the field of suburban representation. A notable departure from this pattern of representation is the 1999 film *Office Space*.

Office Space has a cultish following among the current generation of college students and thirty-somethings. Written and directed by Mike Judge, the creator of *Beavis and Butt-Head* and *King of the Hill*, it tells the story of one man’s desire to “do nothing.” Given this pedigree, it would be easy to dismiss the film as a simple paean to youthful slackerness; but, underneath that surface, is a unique exploration of the changed and changing suburban landscape—physical, cultural, and demographic. The new suburban configuration on display in *Office Space* has been given a multitude of names—“technoburbs” (Fishman), “edge cities” (Garreau), “urban villages” (Leinberger and Lockwood), “sprin-

kler cities” (Brooks)—but the fundamental change expressed by all is a shift in suburban development from the exclusively residential to the “polymorphous” (Jurca 160). As illuminated by the film, alongside, and often adjacent to, the detached single-family homes are now office parks, apartments, condominiums, restaurants, retail centers, and sports stadiums.

Interestingly, even as *Office Space* takes the audience on a tour of the new polymorphous suburban landscape, its dramatic themes are essentially the same as those that define the film and the literature of the bedroom community, namely, the alienation, ennui, and emptiness of suburban existence (Plotz; Jurca). This joining of new landscapes to old themes suggests that while we can literally and figuratively map changes in the American suburbs, what those changes actually mean for and to individuals and the larger culture is harder to pin down. Based on the film, literature, and commentary, Americans are both irresistibly drawn to and repelled by their suburban landscapes and places. From the ways that the central characters in *Office Space* reflect on their lives and interact with each other and their landscape—pushed and pulled between acceptance and alienation—this appears to be as true today as it was in the 1950s. The film, then, simultaneously signposts the new suburban landscape and signifies the historical ambiguity through which Americans have come to terms with the postwar suburbs and experience of suburbia.

Geography and Film: The Real-and-Imagined Suburbs

Foregrounding my discussion of *Office Space* and the suburbs is current theory on the significance of cinematic and creative geographies to real or material spaces. In reference to the American West, Campbell writes, “We feel, think, dream, sense, know, act in, and exist in space, and as such experience it is as a complex, multifaceted texture of the ‘real-and-imagined’” (21). This bleeding together of real-and-imagined geographies applies equally to the American suburbs. The lived experiences and materialities of suburban landscapes are inextricably bound-up in the art and literature that seeks to make sense of those environments.

Along the same lines, Cresswell and Dixon note that approaches to film within geography have rotated around the question of represen-

tation and reality, or, how true films are to the external realities they seek to represent (see also Kennedy and Lukinbeal). This approach focuses on how closely filmmakers hew to geographic reality. This is even true for theories that emphasize the role of film in the ideological reproduction of the world. Even though such approaches put aside the notion of films as uncomplicated expressions of reality, or an artist's vision of reality, they treat cinematic geographies as masks for underlying social conditions and relations and judge them according to their complicity in distorting "real" social geographies (e.g., Hopkins).

However, parallel to Campbell's real-and-imagined American West, Cresswell and Dixon further note that recent geographically informed film theory rejects either/or readings of the relationship between representation and reality: "Films are no longer considered mere images or unmediated expressions of the mind but rather the temporary embodiment of social processes that continually construct and deconstruct the world as we know it" (4). In relation to the American suburbs, this process of ongoing construction and deconstruction is where the significance of *Office Space* lies. In its visualization of the contemporary suburban landscape, the film deconstructs the image of the suburbs as residential community. However, its reconstruction of the meaning of that landscape simultaneously reasserts old social and dramatic themes and articulates new ones. In that sense, the movie embodies a particular moment in suburban development, one where Americans, as suburbanites, writers, artists, and scholars, are struggling to understand how their cultural landscapes have and have not changed.

In stitching together old and new themes and mapping them onto a changed and changing suburban landscape, *Office Space* constitutes what Aitken and Zonn refer to as a "place pastiche" (3). They argue that films, rather than simply representing external reality, represent it in dramaturgical fashion. In so doing, they actively (re)produce social/geographic reality by giving it meaning, that is endowing it with order and structure, and providing images and narratives through which the audience makes sense of the world (7, 21). This process of representation involves piecing together fragments of reality—sounds, images, people (characters), segments of landscape—and presenting them as articulations of "the real" (15–18). Indeed, the appeal of a film like *Office Space* stems in part from its ability to project images of the new suburban/edge city/technoburb environment that seems authentic to those who inhabit it. The movie works as a collage within a collage—a

representational fiction that embeds with other representations to form the larger suburban pastiche that constitutes our image of that culture and its landscape.

To better understand the particular significance of *Office Space* and its relationship to other suburban representations, I turn to Robert Fishman's *Bourgeois Utopias* for historical perspective and to another film from 1999, *American Beauty*, for a counterpoint to Mike Judge's work.

The Classic (Cinematic) Suburb

Far from the world of *Office Space* is the suburban ideal of separating work and residence, an ideal that Robert Fishman identifies with the cultural and economic rise of the "Anglo-American bourgeoisie," or "middle class" (9). This ideal is rooted in eighteenth-century London, but flourished in late-nineteenth-century America and achieved its fullest realization in the railroad suburbs radiating from industrial cities such as Philadelphia (ch. 5). Suburbia, or, suburban culture, rested on the "primacy of the family and domestic life" (3). Achieving this primacy required a physical separation of the home from the world of work and public life. In the premodern world, the suburbs were culturally and economically marginal places; but, following the industrial revolution, they became desired and privileged environments where the new bourgeoisie could retreat from the "corrupt" city (9–12; Tuan ch. 14). Not only did the colonization of the "suburban frontier" promise privacy, ownership, and refuge, it also promised a new synthesis of nature and culture and of city and country. This synthesis, it was hoped, would provide the ideal environment for family life (12, x).

According to Fishman, the realization of bourgeois suburbia was short lived. Ironically, the practical death of the ideal stemmed from its relentless pursuit in postwar Los Angeles (16–17, ch. 6). Making everyplace a low-density residential community of detached single-family homes was physically impossible, even in Los Angeles. Furthermore, pursuing the universalization of the suburban ideal undermined the central city upon which the bourgeois suburb depended for employment and consumption, even as the middle class recoiled from the city's supposed social and moral corruption. What replaced the old suburb–city arrangement is the "technoburb," a configuration based on the decentralization and dispersal of urban functions

beyond housing, and the “technocity,” a greater regional constellation of technoburbs and the old urban core (Fishman 17 and ch. 7). Most fundamentally, work and residence are reunited as commercial development disperses across metropolitan regions.

Even as dominant attitudes toward the suburbs and suburbia in American film have changed over time, from the active “selling” of both the environment and the culture in films such as *It’s A Wonderful Life* (1946) (Rothman) to the “antinostalgia” of *American Beauty* (Plotz), the landscape has remained the same. It is the bourgeois ideal of detached single-family homes that dominates the screen. Whether due to the power of the original postwar dream or cultural inertia, Fishman’s “end of suburbia” (186) has largely been missed by the makers of popular and narrative film.

Released in the same year as *Office Space*, *American Beauty* sets itself in the residential suburb or “bedroom community” (Plotz 10–11). However, unlike *Office Space*, *Beauty* participates in the fundamental “myth of suburbia,” or, the idea that the suburbs allow for the effective separation of the private world of the home from the public world of work (Price 125). While the film does not make the precise location of Lester Burnham’s office cubicle (or his wife Carolyn’s real estate office) clear, in the end it does not matter. *American Beauty* projects a clear image of separation between work and home. To begin, visually, the two are exclusive of each other. The Burnham house is located in a classic, even nineteenth-century, residential neighborhood with detached homes, picket fences, well-manicured front lawns and gardens (including signature blood-red roses), wide, tree-lined streets, and not an office building in sight. The difference in clarity between the identity of the home and that of the workplace sharpens the projection of separation between the two spaces. In terms of the narrative, while Lester’s feelings of alienation and emptiness are felt at work, they are rooted in the home and his strained relationships with his wife and daughter. Indeed, the least significant choice that Lester makes is the one to quit his job. The relative lack of consequence attached to this act upholds the “myth of suburbia” by reinforcing the primacy of family and domestic life.

American Beauty’s image of a separation between home and work exemplifies the dominant pattern of suburban representation. In contrast, *Office Space* departs from the myth of suburbia by vividly and satirically addressing life in the new suburbs—the technoburban/edge

city/urban village/sprinkler city environments that have both absorbed and shaped the suburban population growth of the twentieth century.

Office Space and the World “Beyond Suburbia” (From Fishman, Ch. 7)

Office Space revolves around Peter Gibbons (Ron Livingston) and his desire to “do nothing” instead of his job, which involves fixing the Y2K problem for banks at a convincingly named, but fictional, corporation called “Initech.” While it chronicles Peter’s pursuit of this desire, the film also guides the audience through the new American suburbs. This geography is marked by three key features: the centrality of the office to the new American suburbs and the emergent service economy, the intensification of automobile-centered land uses, and critical demographic changes that have reshaped suburban populations.

The title “Office Space” signifies two levels of insight into the contemporary suburbs and the nature of postbourgeois suburbia. While the classic suburban ideal has the home at its center, in *Office Space* the home as a physical and metaphorical shelter for the nuclear family is practically nonexistent. Peter’s world, first of all, is one that is primarily populated by young, single men. His “home,” rather than being a detached single-family house, is a unit in the “Morning Wood Apartments”—a name that captures both the oft-noted banality of suburban design and the youthful maleness of the film’s demographic landscape. The complex consists of two-story, roadside motel–styled buildings with walls so thin that Peter communicates with his construction worker neighbor Lawrence (Diedrich Bader) through them. The family home, and its implied values of privacy, ownership, and protected domesticity, is no longer the central space (or significance) of suburbia. That space must now coexist with a variety of dwellings and functions that had previously been left to the city. Chief among these is the office, a fact that points to the second level of meaning conveyed by the film’s title.

Enabled by the automobile, road construction, cheaper land prices, and the restructuring of the American economy, the suburbs have become the central location for new American offices. From the 1970s to 1990s, the suburban share of new office development grew to eighty percent. In total, the suburbs contain almost half of the nation’s total

office space (Garreau 5–6; Leinberger and Lockwood 3; Fishman 195–98; Brooks 6). The centrality of the office to the contemporary suburbs also reflects its centrality to the contemporary American economy, which is increasingly based on services and high-tech industries rather than resource extraction and traditional manufacturing. This economic shift has created a need for more offices and fewer factories (Leinberger and Lockwood 5–9; Garreau 5–6). Virtually every character in the film works in this office-based economy, from Lawrence the construction worker to Peter's Initech coworkers, Samir (Ajay Naidu) and the unfortunately named Michael Bolton (David Herman) and his eventual girlfriend, Joanna (Jennifer Aniston), a waitress at a restaurant across the parking lot from Initech. The film's title draws attention to the advent of a suburbs where jobs outnumber bedrooms (Garreau 6–7).

The forces enabling the growth in offices and jobs have had profound implications for suburban landscapes. As noted above, one of the factors making the movement of offices to the suburbs possible has been the postwar growth in road construction and automobile use and ownership. This growth has been essential to the greater dispersal of urban functions and activities. The contemporary suburbs represent the apex of automobile-centered development. Indeed, Fishman suggests that the boundaries of individual suburbs, or "technoburbs" in his parlance, are defined by those places and services that can be easily accessed by private automobile. Individuals, in effect, create their own cities through the short car trips they make during the day (185, 191–92; also Leinberger and Lockwood 7–8; Martinson 192).

The autocenteredness of the suburban landscape is on display from the opening scene of *Office Space*. Peter, Samir, and Michael are all shown driving to work, each in their own cars. Notably, most of the driving in the film occurs on streets rather than freeways, signifying the heightened concentration of home, work, and services in the suburbs. On the one hand, the scene represents the freedom afforded by the automobile as Peter and his friends are contrasted with another coworker, Milton (Stephen Root), who is shown pensively waiting for the bus and mumbling to himself about not being late for work. On the other, the scene also represents the frustration of living in an environment defined by automobile travel. Peter is shown moving from lane to lane only to be cut off at each change. He ruefully watches an elderly man with a walker proceeding down the sidewalk at a faster pace than his car. Samir similarly vents his aggravation on his steering

wheel. Managing this kind of congestion is one of the primary challenges of the new suburbs (Leinberger and Lockwood 17–20; Hall 316–18).

The typical pattern of autooriented development in the new suburbs has resulted in landscapes dominated by wide roads, big box buildings, and parking lots punctuated by strips of “green.” It is also a landscape that is thoroughly corporatized (Fishman 198–205; Brooks 3–5). *Office Space* encapsulates both of these elements (Grunden; O’Hehir). The offices in the film are occupied by corporations with almost interchangeable high-tech sounding names. Besides Initech, which, an office poster proclaims, comes from the combination of “innovation” and “technology,” there is a rival corporation called “Initrode.” Peter’s eventual girlfriend, Jennifer Aniston’s Joanna, begins the film working at “Chotchkie’s” and ends up working at “Flinger’s,” virtually identical chain restaurants specializing in “fun” food like “pizza shooters” and “extreme fajitas.” The effective interchangeability of corporations and corporate environments is another defining element of the new American suburb (Garreau 7; Brooks 4). The generic quality of the suburb in *Office Space* is underscored by the film’s lack of reference to any specific city or state (Baumgarten 2). The cars even sport “USA” license plates.

The new cultural landscape is matched by a refigured social and demographic one. In classic suburbia, particularly in its literary and cinematic guise, the presence of single males like Peter and his friends would be a source of anxiety and tension, a threat to the peace and integrity of the family (Peach 115). Yet, in today’s suburbs, young singles, and other “nonfamily” households, are the statistical norm and nuclear families are increasingly the exception (Cohn; Brooks 6). This demographic turnover is not only represented by Peter’s friends but also by the depiction of older coworkers like Tom Smykowski (Richard Riehle) and Milton.

Tom represents fading bourgeois suburbia. He exists in perpetual fear of losing his job and is, in fact, laid off during the film. He and his wife live in a housing development that looks like a lesser version of the old suburbs—detached single-family homes, but on small lots and without the grand residential exclusivity of the past. Developments such as these represent the legacy of suburbs past (Brooks 4; Fishman 206). The only way that Tom gets to hold onto his miniaturized version of classic suburbia is through a seven-figure lawsuit settlement stemming from an accident with a drunk driver.

Milton seems to represent an even older, and more alien, milieu. Marked by coke-bottle glasses, bad acne, and an irrational attachment to his Swingline stapler (Initech switched to another brand), Milton clearly does not fit in. Constantly talking to himself and jealously guarding every privilege he can, like listening to the radio “at a reasonable volume between 9:00 and 11:00,” he belongs to another world, one where you ride the bus to work—a practice of the classic central city-dependent suburbs—and bring your own coffee and lunch instead of driving your personal car and ducking out to Chotchkie’s on breaks. And, indeed, while Tom is fired during the film, Milton, it turns out, was actually let go five years prior, but has hung on due to a payroll computing “glitch.”

The new mix of jobs and housing types has also meant demographic change in other areas. Not only are the suburbs increasingly home to young singles, they are also home to a wider range of races, ethnicities, and classes than prototypically white bourgeois suburbia (Brooks 6). This new ethnic and racial makeup is most formally represented by the presence of Samir, a Saudi immigrant, as well as by pointed encounters between white and black characters. In the opening scene, for example, Michael is shown expressively listening to “gangsta” rap on his car stereo. Yet, when approached by a black man selling flowers, he locks his car door, hunkers down, and stops his bopping and vocalizing. Once the man has safely passed, he resumes his white-collar celebration of the gangsta life. A recurring gag involves the inability of people to pronounce Samir’s last name (which cleverly is never made entirely clear, even when Samir says it). These moments not only highlight the changing demographics of the suburbs, but also underscore the consequences of suburban urbanization or “reconcentration” of housing types—single family and multifamily—and commercial with residential development (Fishman 178–81). The discomfort and tension resulting from social mixing was one of the driving forces behind the development and cultivation of bourgeois suburbia. That version of American suburbia arose in no small measure from the desire of the white and the middle class to live exclusively with others just like them (Agré; Plotz 10; Fishman 9–12). The new suburbs do not offer whites that kind of isolation or ability to hide from the racial or ethnic “other.”

More than race or ethnicity, *Office Space* highlights a new class configuration in the suburbs. In the bourgeois ideal, Peter, Michael, and

Samir are at an age (young), position (bottom of the ladder), and marital status (single) that make them “presuburban” at best. Even if construction worker Lawrence could afford to buy his way into a classic middle-class suburb, and desired to do so in the first place, he would be conspicuously out of place. Similarly, waitress Joanna’s best hope would be marriage. The social class diversity of the demographic landscape in *Office Space* signifies one of the key breaks between bourgeois suburbia and the new polymorphous suburbs.

Lawrence is stereotypically crude, white working class. The audience is first introduced to him when he shouts through the wall, “Hey Peter, man! Check out channel 9! Check out this chick!” To Peter’s mild disgust, the “chick” turns out to be performing a breast self-exam. Lawrence is perpetually attired in jeans, work boots, and ragged sweat and t-shirts, accented by long, greased back hair and a droopy handlebar mustache. Beer always in hand (he carries his own bottle opener), he offers Peter well-thought-out advice on avoiding the boss, although he clearly takes a certain pride in his own work.

While Peter has a good, neighborly relationship with Lawrence, he is not entirely comfortable with him either. In the first place, consciously or unconsciously, he keeps his friendship with Lawrence separate from his friendships with Michael and Samir. When Lawrence shouts at him through the wall about “the chick” on channel 9, Peter pleads with him to “just pretend like we can’t hear each other through the wall.” This grasping after the privacy and literal detachment of bourgeois suburbia is not only a marker of the class differences between Lawrence and Peter but also of a deeper ambiguity about the new suburbs that will be addressed further below.

While less of a stereotypically working-class character than Lawrence, low-level service worker Joanna does lack the career ambitions of Peter’s white-collar colleagues. This bonds her to Peter and eventually separates the two of them from Michael and Samir, both of whom desperately want secure jobs and affluent lives. What matters most is that the new suburban geography does not afford the bourgeoisie, and those with bourgeois aspirations, an ability to separate themselves from the Lawrences and Joannas of the world; they are now neighbors at home and at work. The demographic diversity of *Office Space* signifies the extent to which the suburbs have been universalized and the suburbia wrenched away from Fishman’s Anglo-American middle class (155, 161; Brooks 5).

Office Space and Traditional Themes

Tracing the contours of the contemporary suburbs is one task. Offering insight into what these geographic changes mean is another. Generally, *Office Space* reflects the same kind of ambivalence regarding this new geography that Joel Garreau (9–15) and Robert Fishman (198–205) identify with Americans at large. This ambiguity extends to suburban residents themselves, which, it is worth noting again, includes more Americans than not, as well as cultural critics and urban planners. David Brooks' *Weekly Standard* article, "Patio Man and the Sprawl People: America's Newest Suburbs," exemplifies this ambivalence. The essay moves from satirizing and deconstructing the new suburbia to affirming its place as the American social norm and defending it against the attacks of upper-crust critics. A similar back-and-forth is at work in *Office Space*.

The literature and, particularly, the film of bourgeois suburbia (Plotz 10–11; Brooks 5–6) are defined by themes of "alienation, anguish, and self-pity" (Jurca 161). These are the very feelings that drive Peter in *Office Space*. Peter feels beaten down and psychologically drained by his job. On top of having to answer to eight different managers when he makes a mistake, no matter how minor, he also has to put up with coworkers and Chotchkie's waiters who diagnose him with "a case of the Mondays." He has to face office banners telling him to always ask, "Is this Good for the Company?" He must confront the absurdity of working for a corporation that hires management consultants who confuse his disinterest with insight, endowing him with "upper management potential," but choose to fire the harder-working and more compliant Samir and Michael. When Peter visits an "occupational hypnotherapist" in the hopes of finding a way to deal with the void he feels in his soul, he tells the doctor that, "Ever since I began working, every single day of my life has been worse than the day before it." He hopefully asks, "Is there any way you could sort of just knock me out so I don't know that I'm at work? Could I come home and think I've been fishing or something?" Peter is alienation, anger, and self-pity personified.

In addition to rehearsing these tried-and-true themes, *Office Space* focuses on the suburban male and his oppression. As Lynn Spigel has noted, this maneuver is common in contemporary film. Significantly, it displaces a historical concern with suburbia and the oppression of women who, consigned to the home, found themselves trapped in and

by the suburbs while their husbands enjoyed the benefits of free movement between the private world of the home and the public world of work (393). Women are certainly marginal characters in *Office Space*. The two most significant are Peter's girlfriends, Anne (Alexandra Wentworth) and Joanna, and they both exist primarily as foils for Peter, with Anne as an agent of oppression and Joanna as part of his liberation. The repeated use of strongly masculinist rap on the film's soundtrack contributes to the film's impression of maleness and male angst, as do little touches like the "Navy Seals" posters in Michael's cubicle and apartment.

Spigel extends her analysis of this type of male-centeredness by characterizing films like *Office Space* as stories of "male liberation," wherein the oppressed suburban (or contemporary) male endeavors to free both himself and everyone around him from the shackles of suburbia (393–401). While Peter and, for that matter, Lester Burnham, are less successful in this role than the protagonists in the films that Spigel analyzes, *The Truman Show* (1998), *Pleasantville* (1998), and, interestingly, *The Matrix* (1999), he does share qualities with those other freedom-yearning movie men trapped in suburbia. His character arc moves from a revelation regarding his own oppression to a mission to first free himself and then those around him.

Peter is more or less successful in freeing himself, that is in approaching his goal of "doing nothing," but he fails almost disastrously when it comes to those around him. Not only do Samir and Michael accept jobs at Initech's rival, Inirode, Peter almost gets the three of them arrested by enticing the other two into actually acting on a fantasy involving computer theft of funds from an Initech client. And while Joanna stands up to her boss at Chotchkie's, who constantly upbraids her for not having enough "flair," she ends up across the parking lot at Flinger's. Furthermore, Joanna's frustration with her job arises more from anger at Peter's accusations about her sex life (he wrongly presumes that she has slept with his boss) than it does from sympathy with his cause. Ironically, the two characters who end up living Peter's dream even better than Peter, Tom and Milton, are also two over whom Peter has virtually no influence.

Where *Office Space* is concerned, the marginalization of women and their oppression in suburbia partly stems from the changed demographic and social landscape of the suburbs themselves. The bringing together of work, residence, and services has made the public world

more accessible to women than it was in the ideal bourgeois suburb (Fishman 195–98). At the same time, the focus on men's problems to the exclusion or subordination of women's may reflect a sense that the increasing ability of women to access the public world of work is a source of the loss and alienation felt by suburban men, perhaps particularly by younger, new suburban men like Peter. This impression of female threats to male preserves is bolstered by the character of Anne, who, on top of being a career-driven professional, is portrayed as angry, pushy, and openly unfaithful. She and Peter break off their relationship when he hangs up on her during a phone call wherein she demands to know, of all things, why he is not at work on a Saturday. Spigel makes a similar case for Truman Burbank's wife and, to a lesser extent, his mother, as agents of oppression in *The Truman Show* (391–94). The character of Carolyn Burnham, or at least the one that we get to know in *American Beauty*, is similarly drawn as the cause of Lester's "confinement" in middle-class suburbia.

Office Space and New Themes

Even though *Office Space* implants long-standing themes of ennui, alienation, and self-pity in new landscapes, and engages with the re-gendering of suburban oppression, the film should not be read as suggesting that a suburb is a suburb is a suburb. There are crucial differences between it and films that take the bedroom community as their referent. *Office Space* breaks new ground in pointing both to new sources of angst and oppression and to chords of optimism regarding the new suburbs and contemporary suburbia.

In the first instance, the locus of oppression is shifted from home to work. Lester Burnham and Truman Burbank both explode in, and desire an escape from, the space of the home. Peter most wants an escape from the space of the office. Rather than erupting with anger and angst in the family dining room (Lester) or kitchen (Truman), Peter, joined by Michael and Samir, vents his anger by taking a hated piece of office machinery out to an isolated field and beating it to bits. In an earlier scene, Peter literally deconstructs his office cubicle. This distinction between home and work is more than cosmetic; it reflects the changing landscape and everyday environment of the suburbs. In the world of the bourgeois suburb, the home is central and primary.

Work, not to mention other classes, “nonfamilies,” recent immigrants, and people of color, exists somewhere else. Film that references this world is suggestive of how people represent and imagine their domestic lives or, at least, the lives of the white, the married, and the bourgeois, but it misses what *Office Space* understands: work has colonized the home environment. One implication of this has already been suggested: women have greater access to the world outside of the home. This has disrupted one of the tenets of bourgeois suburbia, namely the separation of the (male) public from the (female) private.

Another implication is the heightened commodification and corporatization of life and land, and the attendant loss of any sense that the world of the home is, or can be, isolated and insulated from the world of work. Indeed, as a rented condominium or apartment, “home” itself may be a corporate commodity. Furthermore, instead of well-tended lawns and gardens, the new suburban residence is likely to be surrounded by parking lots, shopping malls, office parks, and entertainment complexes. The home is adrift in a sea of work. In the landscape of *Office Space*, there is no refuge, real or illusory, for men or women, from the capitalist economy. The exceptional cases are Tom and Milton, both of whom are able to “buy” their way out of the corporate maze. However, even in these cases salvation only comes through twisted forms of luck and not until after years, even decades, of servitude to Initech.

Peter’s youth and station emphasizes the new significance and position of the economy in American life. In traditional cinema, real angst usually sets in for the bourgeois suburbanite at mid- or late career. Peter is burned out and alienated while on the lower rungs of the career ladder. This implies that contemporary suburbia, with its jumbling together of work and home, and accessibility across lines of class, race, and life stage, is even more insidious than bourgeois suburbia was thought to be. As understood through representations such as *American Beauty* and *The Truman Show*, middle-class suburbia at least offered the consolation of material comfort and the idealistic pursuit of domestic bliss before the emptiness of it all set in. And indeed, in one of *Office Space*’s concluding moments, Peter seems to yearn after the middle-class suburban myth of separation between work and home. In an effort to win Joanna back, he declares, “I may never be happy at my job, but I think, if I could be with you, I could be happy with my life.” It would be hard to come up with a better articulation of the bourgeois suburban ideal than this.

Still, the film is more ambivalent about the new suburbs than it is negative. In another of the film's closing scenes, the audience discovers that Peter has settled on a solution to his work problem—he has adopted Lawrence's working-class lifestyle, a move that echoes Lester Burnham's return to his high-school era burger-flipping for employment. Milton, the ultimate outsider, is finally driven to burn the Initech building down. In the end, we see Peter working at a construction/salvage site where the offices used to be. While satisfyingly surveying the physical remains of his former offices, Peter sums up his outlook to Lawrence: "This isn't so bad, huh? Makin' bucks, gettin' exercise, workin' outside." Lawrence offers Peter an affirming, "Fuckin'-a," which Peter returns with emphasis.

That Peter ends up lighting on this solution to his job-driven angst is not surprising. While Lawrence may be stereotypically crude, he is also stereotypically salt-of-the-earth. He may not be wealthy or mannered, but he is relaxed and honest. At the same time, Michael and Samir choose to remain in the "cubiclized" (Baumgarten 1) world of software by taking jobs at Initrode. There are no recriminations for this decision. Even Peter treats it as reasonable, although the film strongly implies that their prior friendship is basically over. Peter also seems to accept Joanna's job at Flinger's. Indeed, her job marks her as fundamentally different from career-driven Anne. What matters here is the element of choice. If nothing else, contemporary suburbia has room for a variety of occupations and lifestyles, something that cannot be said of the bourgeois iteration. This ability to choose is an important consolation, for it is in these new suburban environments that most Americans "now live, learn, work, shop, play, pray, and die" (Garreau 8). Even if space is no longer available for Peter to hide his "life" from his work, he can at least choose his work and, in effect, define his "office space," without marginalizing himself entirely from the rest of America's ever more suburban society.

Conclusion

On one level, then, as envisioned through *Office Space*, the suburbs remain "the environment we love to hate," even though it is also the one where most Americans live (Jurca 161). On another, though, the film clearly highlights that the suburbs Americans actually live in

today are not necessarily what they are imagined to be. The accessibility of the new suburbs, to the work place and to a wider range of people, makes them fundamentally different from the bourgeois suburbs that dominate the cultural imagination. As *Office Space* makes clear, these changes extend residential choice to those outside of the white, the middle class, and the male, but not without also extending, maybe intensifying, the feelings of ennui, emptiness, and self-pity that pervade Fishman's, and *American Beauty's*, bourgeois utopias. The suburban dialectic of liberation and oppression is reinscribed in a new landscape. To appreciate the opportunities afforded and constraints imposed by contemporary suburbia requires a reimagining and re-imagining of its underlying landscape. *Office Space* embodies the beginnings of such an imaginative de/reconstruction and is a vital piece of a new place pastiche for American suburbia.

Notes

I thank Sriram Khé, Emily Plec, Doug Smith, and, particularly, Anne-Marie Deitering for their comments and suggestions on various drafts of the paper. I also thank the students and, especially, Jason Martorano, from the Urban Planning and Policy class I taught at Western Oregon in 2002. It was their work and discussions that got me thinking about the connections between *Office Space* and Fishman's *Bourgeois Utopias*.

Works Cited

- American Beauty*. Dir. Sam Mendes. Perf. Kevin Spacey, Anette Bening, Thora Birch, Wes Bentley, and Mena Suvari. Dream Works SKG and Jinks/Cohen Company, 1999.
- Agre, Philip. "Landscape and Identity: A Note on the History of the Suburbs." *Wide Angle* 15 (Oct. 1993): 22–29.
- Aitken, Stuart, and Leo Zonn. "Re-Presenting the Place Pastiche." *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film*. Ed. Stuart Aitken and Leo Zonn. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1994. 3–25.
- Baumgarten, Marjorie. "Rev. of *Office Space*." *The Austin Chronicle Movie Guide* 19 Feb. 1999: 2 pages. 30 Aug. 2002 <<http://www.auschron.com/film/pages/movies/8887.htm>>.
- Brooks, David. "Patio Man and the Sprawl People: America's Newest Suburbs." *The Weekly Standard* 12 Aug. 2002: 7 pages. 8 Aug.

- 2002 <http://www.weeklystandard.com/content/public/articles/000/000/001/531wlvngasp>).
- . "Patio Man and the Sprawl People, part 2." *weeklystandard.com* 3 Aug. 2002: 5 pages. 22 Sept. 2002 <http://www.weeklystandard.com/content/public/articles/000/000/001/532gxuur.asp>).
- Campbell, Neil. *The Cultures of the American New West*. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000.
- Cohn, D'Vera. "Census 2000: Cities and Suburbs are Trading Places: Young Singles, Other 'Non-Families' Taking Over Areas, Study Shows." *The Washington Post* 6 Feb. 2002: 7 pages. 4 Sept. 2002 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wpdyn?pagename=article&node=&contentId=A29567-2002Feb5¬Found=true>).
- Cresswell, Tim, and Deborah Dixon. "Introduction: Engaging Film." *Engaging Film: Geographies of Mobility and Identity*. Ed. Tim Cresswell and Deborah Dixon. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002. 1–10.
- Fishman, Robert. *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*. New York: Basic Books, 1987.
- Garreau, Joel. *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*. New York: Anchor Books, 1992.
- Grunden, Chris. Rev. of *Office Space*. *Film Journal International* 30 Aug. 2002. 2 pages. 30 Aug. 2002 <http://www.filmjournal.com/Article.cfm/PageID/45108554>).
- Hall, Peter. *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century*. Updated ed. Blackwell. Malden, MA, 1996.
- Hopkins, Jeff. "A Mapping of Cinematic Places: Icons, Ideology, and the Power of (Mis)Representation." *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film*. Ed. Stuart Aitken and Leo Zonn. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1994. 47–65.
- It's A Wonderful Life*. Dir. Frank Capra. Perf. James Stewart, Donna Reed, Lionel Barrymore, and Thomas Mitchell. RKO, 1946.
- Jurca, Catherine. *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001.
- Kennedy, Christina, and Christopher Lukinbeal. "Towards a Holistic Approach to Geographic Research on Film." *Progress in Human Geography* 21 (1997): 33–50.
- Leinberger, Christopher, and Charles Lockwood. "How Business is Reshaping America." *The Atlantic* Oct. 1986: 23 pages. 27 Aug. 2002 <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/95nov/malls/howbiz.htm>).
- Martinson, Tom. *American Dreamscape: The Pursuit of Happiness in Post-war Suburbia*. New York: Garret and Graf Publishers Inc., 2000.

- The Matrix*. Dirs. Andy and Larry Wachowski. Perf. Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, Carrie-Anne Moss, and Hugo Weaving. Groucho II Film Partnership, Silver Pictures, and Village Roadshow Productions, 1999.
- Office Space*. Dir. Mike Judge. Perf. Ron Livingston, Stephen Root, Gary Cole, and Jennifer Anniston. Twentieth Century Fox, 1999.
- . DVD, widescreen version. Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 1999.
- O’Hehir, Andrew. “Mike Judge’s ‘Office Space’ is a Funny, Well-Meaning Ode to Anti Ambition.” Rev. of Office Space. *Salon* 19 Feb. 1999. 5 pages. 30 Aug. 2002 (<http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/reviews/1999/02/19review.htm>).
- Peach, Linden. “An Incident in the Neighborhood: Crime, Contemporary Fiction and Suburbia.” *Expanding Suburbia: Reviewing Suburban Narratives*. Ed. Roger Webster. Polygons: Cultural Diversities and Intersections 6. New York: Bergham Books, 2000. 109–24.
- Plotz, John. “Virtually Being There: Edmund Wilson’s Suburbs.” *Southwest Review* 87 (2002): 10–28. Academic Search Elite. EBSCO Publishing. Western Oregon University Library, 28 Aug. 2002.
- Price, Joanna. “Between Subdivisions and Shopping Malls: Signifying Everyday Life in the Contemporary American South.” *Expanding Suburbia: Reviewing Suburban Narratives*. Ed. Roger Webster. Polygons: Cultural Diversities and Intersections 6. New York: Bergham Books, 2000. 125–40.
- Rothman, William. “Hollywood and the Rise of Suburbia.” *East–West Film Journal* 3 (1989): 96–105.
- Spigel, Lynn. *Welcome to the Dream House: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs*. Durham: Duke UP, 2001.
- The Truman Show*. Dir. Peter Weir. Perf. Jim Carrey, Ed Harris, Laura Linney, Noah Emmerich, Natascha McElhone, and Holland Taylor. Paramount Pictures and Scott Rudin Productions, 1998.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values. Morning Side Edition*. New York: Columbia UP, 1990.

Shaun Huston is an associate professor of geography and film studies at Western Oregon University. He is currently working on a documentary about the community of comic book creators in Portland, OR. He writes on comics, film, and television for PopMatters.

Copyright of *Journal of Popular Culture* is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.